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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S.-CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused news coverage October 8 on the controversy revolving around Taiwan's National Palace Museum (NPM), which denied it received an offer by a French businessman to donate two Qing Dynasty bronze sculptures he owns to the NPM; and on the discussion of "fat cats" in Taiwan. In terms of editorials and commentaries, an op-ed in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" discussed U.S. President Barack Obama's recent decision not to meet with the Dalai Lama and its connection to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. The article said that, given the Obama administration's concerns that any decision made in terms of U.S. arms will likely jeopardize its relations with China, the chances are slim that the United States will sell F16 C/D fighter jets to Taiwan in the near future. End summary.

"The Dalai Lama and F-16 C/D Fighter Jets"

Liu Shih-chung, now a Visiting Fellow at the U.S.-based Brookings Institution, opined in the mass-circulation "Apple Daily" [circulation: 520,000] (10/8):

"... By contrast, given China's violation of human rights, its attempts to stifle Tibet, and the already marginalized Taiwan issue, it is not surprising that [President] Obama decided not to meet with the Dalai Lama this time. For the Ma Ying-jeou administration in Taiwan, cross-strait relations are now in a relatively stable state; [such a development] could free Obama, who is now working on the U.S. health care and economic issues, from having to worry [about the Taiwan Strait]. Even though the Ma administration has been sending out strong signals showing [Taiwan's] interest in purchasing F16 C/D fighter jets by strengthening its lobbying in Washington D.C., via its legislative contacts, and having Ministry of National Defense officials attend the 'U.S.-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference', the Obama administration remains unmoved.

"In addition to the afore-mentioned factors shaping the new U.S.-Taiwan strategic framework, the high-ranking U.S. officials are also concerned whether any new decision they make in terms of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan would jeopardize the current atmosphere in the Taiwan Strait, which, as a result, like the meeting with Dalai Lama now, will surely create uncertainty for the development of U.S.-China relations. It seems evident that promises made by the Ma administration to the United States will not be able to remove such concerns [of Washington]. After all, U.S. arms sales to Taiwan have always been a major difference between Washington and Beijing. On the other hand, the Obama administration was confused by Ma Ying-jeou's recent remarks on Taiwan's national defense policy. For example, during a press conference in the wake of Typhoon Morakot, Ma said 'Taiwan's biggest enemy is no longer China but mother nature.' Also, Ma directly announced before even consulting with the Ministry of National Defense that he had agreed to alter the number of Black Hawk helicopters that Taiwan decided to buy from the United States from 60 to 45 and use the money saved to buy rescue helicopters. ... In any case, Ma's flip-flopping remarks in terms of strengthening Taiwan's self-defense capabilities have indeed conveyed a mixed message to Washington.

It is either that the Ma administration is playing a two-handed strategy, or that Ma is, under the military's pressure, forced to change his previous attitude not to strengthen Taiwan's national defense. Such unusual signals indicate that Ma's leadership, prestige and the foundation of his relations with the military are very fragile, and the impact of such fragility will not only weaken the awareness of Taiwan's national army of telling apart friend from foe but will also cause the international community to question the Taiwan government's determination to beef up its national defense capabilities.

"Given all the factors above, the chances are slim that the Obama administration will announce that it will sell F16 C/D fighter jets to Taiwan next summer. The only likelihood will be that the United States will announce its decision to sell other non-sensitive weapons to Taiwan just to placate the Ma administration."

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